

Army Series.]

[No. 17.

THE RECONNOISSANCE.

BY

JOHN F. W. WARE.

BOSTON:
AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION.
1864.

THE RECONNOISSANCE.

WHAT a queer word that is! How do you pronounce it? I don't find any two men together who pronounce it the same way. It is one way in the army, where you know what the thing is, and it is another way at home, where the word rather confuses us about the thing. What was the need in having the thing called that way? Why can't we, who have a good, masculine, hearty native tongue of our own, stick to it, and not go about the world over beating up and engrafting foreign words and phrases, and treating them with a little more deference than we do our own? I believe in loyalty to my mother tongue as fully as in loyalty to my mother land. General Dix has been much applauded because he gave the order to shoot any man who should haul down the American flag. I wish somebody had the power to give such an order against any one who hauls down the American language. Is not a language a part of, does it not represent, nationality as well as a flag? What an absurdity it is to be obliged to call one of our most

stirring songs, which was written and intended to be national, by that outlandish name, *Viva l'America!* Was there ever a greater insult to the good sense, the patriotism, of a people? I marvel that it has been so silently submitted to. I don't care to lose the tune, but I hope we shall some way be rid of the words, or that part of them at least. I go for the *language*, as well as "the *flag*, of the free."

Well, never mind the word. It has a meaning. and a good meaning. It is a thing of use, and great use too, especially where one is in the enemy's country. What would become of that general who should not make a reconnoissance one of his frequent duties? How could he advance securely, fight successfully, or even stand still safely, otherwise? He must know the character of the country before and about him, — its roads, its streams, the lay of the land, its capacity to support; he must know the number, the position, the disposition, of his antagonist; he must be wary and quick to understand his movements and his resources before the inevitable advance and attack are made. I take it that an army may fight ever so well, but if nothing is known of the character of the foe in front, or the character of the ground to be fought over, the chances are that it cannot fight successfully. There must ever be some other element of success in a battle beside courage.

Now let us apply this morally. I do not quite like to say, what I suppose some would say readily, that the soul of man is in an enemy's country, because I believe we are always and only in God's country, — the country of our best Friend. But I will say that in this country the soul is at war. It is beset with foes. It is held in leaguer. It is in great peril. Its whole life has got to be struggle. It must have the utmost vigilance, the most steadfast courage, the most wary prudence, — any and every quality or virtue which a soldier needs to have or to exercise in presence of an enemy.

These alone, however, will not avail. We need something more than these powers within us. Shut up to themselves, in the attitude, with the will, of attack or defence, they can do little. We are like men cooped up in an isolated fortress on the top of a rock or on an island in the midst of a sea. What we need is, to know something of our surroundings, to find out what there is outside of us, what we are to meet, and how we are to meet it.

How shall this be done? By a *reconnaissance*. A man must know something of the world he goes into before he goes into it. He must not trust merely to his imagination, his dream, of it; he must not imagine himself to have a power none has had, and be able to assume and hold a mastery over it. He must know something about it, its lures and pitfalls; not only that he has a strong

and wary enemy, but wherein his strength and power lie. He needs to know something of his foes before it will be any way safe to measure strength with them.

And this a man is apt not to do. He has all sorts of wise things said to him, all sorts of friendly warnings, but he generally guesses he is as wise as anybody, as capable of caring for himself as they are. He repels the overtures of experience, and in all confidence marches out to the combat before him. He does not deny that it has difficulties. He expects resistance. He believes he shall have hard blows, and many of them; that only through fidelity and fighting he shall win. But he does not doubt that he shall win. In imagination he sees himself, after every struggle, crowned victor; and there comes his trouble. In the over-confidence of ignorance, into an unknown world, with the best purposes, he goes, only to find that his purposes avail him little; that his expectations were the veriest impossibilities; that the rude, sharp, combined assault of temptations whose wiles and powers he did not know are more than a match for him; that they have not only bruised and beaten and vanquished, but have mortified and discouraged him.

I have seen the criticism made by an officer of high position, that the battle at Williamsburg was a battle fought without a reconnoissance. I should say, upon general principles, that the objection was

valid ; while I am sure that in life to undertake anything of moment without a first survey and study of the ground before would not only be folly, but likely to be fatal. The merchant does not embark in a venture without understanding the market. The manufacturer determines the character of his fabric by the character of the demand. The farmer plants as he knows his soil will yield, or as consumption requires. Every right, successful action in active life is determined by forethought, inquiry, judicious observation, and a calm balancing of all the varieties of information that can be had ; and it is just as much more important that this should take place in our moral and religious life as our moral and religious life is more important than the life of business. As he would be set aside as an unwise man who should plunge into the world of affairs with reckless ignorance and indifference to all facts, as success in his case could only be a happy blunder, so must he be held unwise who shall present himself in the life of duties, temptations, trials, ignorant of, indifferent to them, while no blunder can save him. Rightly to live, surely to pass through this world, wisely to discharge all obligation, to win now peace and one's own self-respect, and hereafter peace with God's approval, can only come through a constant fore-looking and out-looking. No advance without it. A man omits, despises it, at his peril.

Another thing is essential to a reconnoissance.

The Saviour expressed it when he said, "Or what king, going to war against another king, sitteth not down and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand." It is not the ground to be fought over, or the number and disposition of the hostile force only, but your own ability to meet that force, which needs to be known, which forms a vital part of this duty. Without it you cannot make a success.

It was an old saying of heathen philosophy, "Know thyself." It has been repeated in both Testaments. It is a maxim we learned at school. We wrote it in our copy-books. It has been urged upon us by the experiences of life. Like many good things, we pay little heed to it; and a great many of us grow up knowing all about our neighbors, but nothing about ourselves.

Now, if a man is self-ignorant, he may just as well give all up. What can he do? He will be getting into difficulty all the time. He will be just where he ought not to be. He will do just what he ought not to do. When he ought to fight, he will run; and when he ought to run, he will stay and try to fight, and get whipped for his blunder. The way men get into these moral exposures which make such trouble is, that they over-estimate their ability to resist them. They put themselves where there is no need of their being; they court exposures which they might just as well avoid. Temp-

tations do not come to us so much as we go after them. That is the way a man becomes a drunkard, a gambler, or any bad thing. Ignorant of himself, he will reply to your warning, "Just as if there was any danger!" He will not try to avoid, he will seek it. When you hear a man say that, set him down as one who has neglected to reconnoitre, and be sure disaster will visit his presumption. The Apostle said many true things, and uttered many needed warnings, but nothing more true or more needed than when he said, "Let any man that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Is it not the great fact and trouble in the life of many a man, that all the way through he puts himself, through ignorance of himself, in the way of temptations that God never meant for him, that God would save him from, which he is no way prepared to cope with? The bravado with which many go out into life, with which many pass through life, is strikingly in contrast with the true bravery of him who, by calm, careful, thorough survey, is always found at the post of duty, equal to every emergency, and conqueror in every assault. It is the self-confidence of self-ignorant Peter, not the quiet, consistent courage of the wise and humble Master.

Two things let me add about this duty. First, *let it be frequent*. Some men think it does harm to examine ourselves too much, that it makes morbid and discourages. Surely it will not so affect any hearty, earnest, brave man. Why, the essence

of life is to know one's self. What the old heathen philosophy said, and both Testaments repeat, must be true. All life proves it. You can't do anything sure without a thoroughly posted self-knowledge. Not the self of last year or last week is the one you want to know, but the self of to-day. So you must make the inward reconnoitring a frequent thing. Do it every day, so as to be sure that you know just where you are, just what your strength, just what your weakness, so that you can detect any growing folly, strengthen any struggling or threatened virtue. The good general "feels" the country he is in often. To-day's report is not necessarily true of to-morrow. He is on the alert to corroborate or to correct by fresh experience his former decision. He will not attack by last week's report, nor will he trust to the defence based upon past information. He knows that a foe is active, wary, fruitful in expedient, and that he is always in new danger. It must be so with you. Of what use for you to know yourself thoroughly to-day, all about your dangers and exposures, to settle your defence, post your guards, strengthen your weak points, if you are going to leave them to themselves, and take it for granted that the work is done once for all, and that you are henceforth safe? Is not our enemy always busy? Are not our moral moods, habits, cravings, temptations, always changing? Are we not in danger to-day from one thing, next week from another, and does

not every change of condition, employment, companionship, change the character of our exposure? We can only be safe by constant inquiry into our moral and religious condition, by a daily *feeling* of these enemies so thick about our soul's way, a daily knowing of our souls themselves, to see what heart there is in them for their never-ending, ever-shifting warfare. It is the reconnoissance insures the safety, secures the victory to the soldier, and self-knowledge it is, under God, which gives safety and victory to the soul.

Then always make your reconnoissance *in force*. Do not half do it. Put your whole manhood into it. Do not be afraid to know just where you are, just what you are, the worst as well as the best. Face your weaknesses, your temptations, your dangers, your sins. Know them, brand them, expel them. Don't wince or shrink or shirk. Don't allow any skulking. Drag out the secret thing. What is the use of asking God to cleanse us from secret sins, if we are going to shut our eyes to them ourselves, or persist in hugging them? Do not, as some, draw back when the search reveals what you do not like to see. Keep your eye open, your heart single and brave. A half-advance is about as bad as a full retreat. It reveals nothing of real value, increases your reluctance to search again, encourages your bad habits and desires; the evil things in you get to feel that, however much parade and bluster you may make, you will never be in earnest,

and will grow more and more exacting and secure ; and you will be tenfold more their slave in the end. When, therefore, you reconnoitre, let it be *in force*, with all your mind, and all your strength, and all your heart.

Plutarch says, in his *Life of Cæsar*, that “ he was, above all men, gifted with the faculty of making the right use of everything in war, most especially of seizing the right moment.” Was not this the true secret of his success, — he was always on the alert, knew all about his foe, all about his own resource, and was ready at the right moment to strike the right blow ? With us the golden moments slip. We all have them given us, but they seem as lead as they pass away, because we are not alert, not watchful, not ready. The moment comes to do. God calls. The opportunity of victory is given. We might be heroes, — more than conquerors. The moment passes, the opportunity, the privilege, and a deeper, more hopeless darkness shuts upon us. God has been faithful. The neglect is with ourselves. We did not know the hour nor ourselves in it.

Would you be to your soul what Cæsar was to Rome, — better, far better, would you partake in the power and victory of Christ, — know thoroughly, by constant inquiry, both the world and your own soul. Such knowledge is wisdom above price.